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THE MUSKRAT ALL BUT GONE

Trappers In Dorchester
Feel The Pinch

By ROBERT A. ERLANDSON
(Sun Staff Correspondent)

Cambridge, Md., Nov. 22 — The Dorchester county muskrat, which once provided a million-dollar-a-year business, has all but deserted the brackish marshes where once he thrived.

Where has he gone, and why? ask the trappers, who feel the pinch of no pelts.

Three county sportsmen, all former muskrat trappers tired of inconclusive studies and surveys, have decided to try a practical approach to rehabilitation of the muskrat population.

One of the men, M. Baker Robbins, county commissioner-elect, has donated a 5-acre test marsh on the Blackwater River, in the Shorters Wharf area.

Using the heavy equipment of a second member, Elihu Abbott, who is also the national muskrat skinning champion, they plan to create ideal muskrat propagation conditions in an effort to lure the marsh rabbit back.

The third member is Emmett Andrews, a former senior editor with the Central Intelligence Agency and former Cambridge High School principal, now employed as a training specialist in the State Comptroller's office.

Mr. Andrews said the 1961 muskrat catch was about 50,000, whereas at the peak, in the 1930's, the trapping of 500,000 animals was not unusual.

Economy Seen Hurt

Mr. Robbins said that the loss of muskrats hurt Dorchester's economy. He said muskrats once provided a living for dozens of full-time trappers, now there are about 25 working part time.

Mr. Andrews explained that Mr. Abbott's machinery will dig a long ditch through the marsh, creating a 60-foot-wide pond. Other ditches will radiate from the pond to provide the amount of water the muskrats require.

If necessary, he said, the entire area will be fenced to keep out the foxes and raccoons which, along with flood tides, owls, hawks and wild dogs, pillage the muskrat beds, the two-story grass houses the little aquatic rodents build in the tall grass.

Trappers pointed out the fox and coon as particular enemies, tear that off the tops of the beds. The young muskrats not eaten by the predators drown when the frantic mother drags them down the escape well into the stream, and an entire litter is lost.

Mr. Abbott said the muskrat market is on the upgrade, "but where we used to trap thousands, we now only get hundreds."

He said he plans to build a high bank along the ditch, claiming that a bank is the best protection a muskrat can get. Mr. Abbott said the animal digs an underwater entrance up into the mud and establishes a concealed nest.

"Banks are one of our big answers," Mr. Abbott said. "But we just don't know why they aren't breeding. The rats we catch are big and healthy, but they have very few young."

He said, too, that he feels muskrats live in seven-year cycles, seven years of vigorous breeding, seven years at a standstill and seven years on the downgrade.

Kept Going Down

After their peak period, they started down and kept going, Mr. Abbott said, while their enemies, foxes and coons, flourished.

The flood tide problem appeared when the water swept over the marshes and failed to drain off quickly enough. The plants on which muskrats fed became polluted by excess salt and the animals moved on, seeking new food supplies.

Where they went, nobody seems to know. "They just disappeared in the bush, like the Roanoke colonists," said Mr. Andrews.

He hopes that creation of ideal breeding grounds will go a long way toward solving the problem. "We think that once we proved our theories, the farmers and marsh owners will follow suit on their lands," Mr. Andrews said.

Mr. Andrews, in 1938, founded the Cambridge Outdoor Show at which Mr. Abbott won his muskrat-skinning championship.

Mr. Robbins is president of the contest, which attracts participants from many states, but particularly from Maryland and Louisiana where the muskrat re-

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